

The Plot Against
MISS POMEROY

Charlotte Armstrong

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The Plot Against
MISS POMEROY

BY CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

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Beneath provoking laughter, sometimes secret places lie. Look hard

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MISS POMEROY was tired, and she tasted dust. Of her three passengers, only young Sheela claimed to have a driver's license. Miss Pomeroy would not let Sheela drive, even though, as she slowed the car, coming into some sort of settlement, her eyes were aching. According to the signpost, they had already rolled off a hundred and twenty miles. Fifty more and she would be rid of these difficult girls.

To travel together was neither her idea nor, to do them justice, theirs. It was Miss Hunt, the headmistress, who, with a bland logic and an idiotic optimism, had caught the four of them with no reasonable grounds for refusing. Term's end, and Miss Pomeroy driving south? Norma, Jane, and Sheela lived to the south. She would pass their very doors? Of course! How pleasant for all!

It wasn't pleasant for Miss Pomeroy. It was a cheat, she felt, to carry the same old strain into this first day of her freedom. A teacher's freedom is as sacred as anybody's.

Of all the girls in the school, she must shepherd home these difficult three. Perhaps Miss Hunt had hoped to force a readjustment. Miss Hunt's hope was forlorn.

Jane Avery, Miss Pomeroy thought, she could have handled. Jane was the henchwoman type, appended to the unholy two. Silly Jane would have giggled and exchanged eyebeams as well with less disturbing companions. As it was, Miss Pomeroy longed to smack her for the sly mysteries of malice in her smothered laughter. All morning she had heard, as she was meant to hear, the squeak of Jane's mirth, pretending to burst uncontrollably past Jane's tight little lipsticked mouth. And then the covering cough, the false choking. There was nothing Miss Pomeroy could do about it. Nothing. On the back seat, Jane was laughing at her. Perhaps, behind her back, Norma raised an eyebrow. Or in the flat innocence of Sheela's last remark there was a code word. Never a thing to catch up. Just the incomprehensible cruelty of these three, against her. Miss Pomeroy had no defense except to behave correctly.

Norma Bache was heavy and fat, and there was something ruthless and cold under her lowering lids. Miss Pomeroy longed to speak harshly, even brutally, to Norma. To smack Jane. Over Sheela, she could have wept.

Sheela was dark and lithe, and in her monkey face pale-brown eyes were lined vividly by the black of her long, thick lashes. Sheela had the indefinable thing, the quality of spirit, that pulled her contemporaries toward her and after her. It was a charm. Whether it was a certain daring, a spark of

inventiveness, that made for pure entertainment and excitement; or whether it was because Sheela was essentially a little pagan, cozily wild, freakishly at home in the jungle world; or whether because Sheela needed none of her companions and would as leave have stood alone, Miss Pomeroy could not fathom.

It was not her father's money, Miss Pomeroy felt sure. Sheela was Malcolm Mason's daughter, and Malcolm Mason had a great deal of money. And influence. In February, only two weeks after the term began, Miss Pomeroy herself had felt its weight.

It was a rule of the school that on Saturday morning all girls whose grades for the week had not met a certain standard be required to spend two hours in a study hall. One Saturday morning Malcolm Mason had appeared. He demanded his daughter. He had a treat in store for her. He would take her away for the weekend, at once.

Miss Pomeroy, who had sent Sheela to study hall for a bad showing in History B, explained the rule. Sheela's father, baldly and with no pretense of an excuse, had demanded special privilege. Miss Pomeroy had been forced to say there was no such thing. A rule was a rule. There was a collision.

Publicly, Miss Hunt had refused either to overrule her subordinate or defy Mr. Mason. Privately, she had talked Miss Pomeroy into a compromise. In the end, Miss Pomeroy had let Sheela go. True, she was to make up the time another day, as if this saved face. It was special privilege just the same.

SINCE that day, Sheela had been a thorn. The worst of it was that the girl had intelligence. She might have been one of the quick and responsive few whom it is a joy to teach. To lose one of these was bitter, for they are scarce.

Never again did she do bad work, but her very excellence was mockery. For it was literal and precise and contemptuous. Miss Pomeroy had tried to break through whatever barrier existed; she had been scrupulously fair, had tried praise. Now and then Sheela would look at her thoughtfully, as if on the brink of conceding. "I might like you," the pale eyes would say. "Yes, indeed, I might. I might join you and follow willingly, for I could. But I don't think I will. Not to-day." And she would turn, and the three would set up their sly alliance of contempt and mockery.

There was nothing to do about it. Miss Pomeroy went on being fair. But she could have shaken them until their teeth rattled for the contempt that put

Miss Pomeroy's not-quite-thirty years in the bin with dusty age. As if Sheela and Norma and Jane opened kitten eyes on the world and were at once ahead of her. As if Miss Pomeroy had never been fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Had never known the things they knew. As if Miss Pomeroy were the ignorant one and their sophistication could not abide her rusty conventions.

Miss Pomeroy could have shaken them and cried, "Listen! I will respect your youth and your freshness if you will respect me for what I really am. Can't you see I am trying to treat you as if you were real?" All she could do was grit her teeth and behave correctly.

She drove the car into a gas station and stopped.

"Where are we?" asked Sheela, with wide eyes. Miss Pomeroy named the town. "Are there any points of interest here?" Sheela's accent was mild and her neck meek as she craned to look up and down the commonplace main street. The question was a jeer and a jibe, of course. It remembered how Miss Pomeroy had been telling them, during the morning, bits of the history of places through which they passed. It said, "Who cares about that old junk!" It said, "The past bores us, and *you've* bored us all morning. But trot out some more of your musty old facts, if you must."

Miss Pomeroy did not reply.

"Shall we dance?" said Norma suddenly. A fad phrase.

"Save me the waltz," said Sheela. A code word. Jane's giggle exploded softly, but not quite softly enough. Miss Pomeroy knew the reference this time. She, with the dancing master, had demonstrated the waltz one day. Rather wistfully, Miss Pomeroy saw her memory picture—she in the grace and dignity of the lovely old dance—now tarnishing in her mind.

She said dryly, "You're slaying Jane," and in the dead silence knew that no one but an old fuddy said "You slay me" any more. Nothing one could do.

MISS POMEROY got out and asked the attendant to check the tires and fill the tank. Then, straightening her tired back, she stood looking at her tormentors. Norma and Jane sprawled on the back seat. Jane, her knees curled, sat sidewise. Norma's bulk rested low, the back of her neck pressing the cushion, the roll of her eyes seeming sullen. But Sheela, next to the driver's seat, was stiff and prim. She had not so much as crossed her ankles. She was a caricature of the bright-eyed tourist. She meant it to irritate. "I can be corny, like you," the attitude mocked.

Miss Pomeroy thought, And if I ever let loose, what I could tell you, my girl, about the facts of life would curl your hair. She felt herself flushing.

She said gently, “Will you let me treat you to a soda, girls? There’s a drugstore, I see.”

“Oh, Miss Pomeroy,” gushed Sheela, “you mustn’t. We have money.” They were out of the car and across the street like a flock of birds. Even fat Norma rolled out of the car as fast as a bird from a cage.

They feel it, too, Miss Pomeroy thought—this senseless strain, this pointless hostility. She sighed. What the crack about money meant, if anything, she was too tired to wonder. Her own throat was parched. She would have relished something cold to drink. But she did not follow. Leave them alone.

Fifty miles more. She knew that the road immediately ahead descended through a pass in the hills to a lower plain. Once on the level land, she could push on faster, be rid of them sooner. It would be worth the effort.

The attendant was moving her car nearer the air line. Miss Pomeroy went into the ladies’ room. At least she could wash away some of the dusty feeling from her eyes and freshen her face. Inside the tiny cubicle, she wiggled her shoulders to relax them. She grimaced at the glass.

Her own face reassured her. It was a darned good face, thought Eunice Pomeroy, the face of an attractive woman not yet thirty. The tired eyes were able to twinkle, and Eunice winked at Eunice. No use letting those kids get her down. Miss Pomeroy must take it on the chin, but Eunice could smile. So she grinned, wiped off the dust, combed her fair hair, renewed her make-up, taking her time.

“Is she coming?”

“No,” said Sheela. “She went to the ladies’ room.”

“Not again!” Norma’s eyebrows leered. Jane’s straw made noises in the bottom of her glass.

“Broth-thurr, what a ride!”

“Speed-Queen Pomeroy.”

“I wish she’d let me take the wheel.”

Jane squeaked. “We saw a lot of scenery, though. We sure did.”

“Boring,” said Norma. She didn’t mean the scenery, as the three at once were aware. It was a challenge, and Sheela’s wits worked on it spontaneously.

“What would happen if we hid? What if we snuck out the back?” Sheela’s eyes were brilliant. “What if I called Dad and had a car sent? Let her think we’re lost?”

“Say she left us in the lurch,” said Jane breathlessly.

Norma’s big body turned toward Sheela in cold inquiry.

“She wouldn’t do that,” said Sheela thoughtfully. “Know what she’d do? She’d sit.” Her giggle was pitched lower than Jane’s. “Strike you funny?”

“Not too. The old bag could get us expelled, I suppose,” drawled Norma, as if it didn’t matter much, but here was a thought.

“Nuh-uh,” said Sheela.

“No?”

“No. Not Pomeroy.”

“Bet?”

“I’ll bet.”

“She’s got a boiling point,” said Norma.

“Fake,” said Sheela.

“What’s a fake?”

“Pomeroy. It’s a mouse. A complete mouse.”

“I dunno,” said Norma judiciously.

“Bet?”

Jane giggled awesomely. “You mean we’re going to do it?” It was in the air. They were going to do something. The terrible three could not ride tamely on.

“Spot of bother, Shee,” said Norma, turning her head. “No back door.”

“I have a better idea,” Sheela said.

MISS POMEROY came out into the daylight refreshed and composed. She had her bag open, reaching for money to pay, when she saw the

attendant's head jerk toward her in what could only be surprise. Then, at once, she saw that her car was gone.

He jogged toward her, looking agog. Miss Pomeroy interrupted his stammer. "The girls?" she said, white-lipped. "All three?"

"They come across and got in. I thought—"

"You have been paid?" she asked.

"The fat—the stout one paid me. The keys was in it. I never gave it a glance. Pulled out. I thought you—" He was stopped. It had occurred to him that the girls must have known they lacked one of their party. He was stopped, unable to imagine.

Miss Pomeroy's heart pounded and her hands were ice. *She* could imagine. It was a cruel and ruthless prank. She was at their mercy, stranded in this bare little town. They might return, sooner or later, as their whim moved them, with a fancy tale of insulting transparency. Or they might not. They might even expect her to make her way meekly on, by bus. No, surely they would know she could not do that. They would know they held her paralyzed. No matter if she guessed they did it to tease, *she* could not, even in her anger, abandon them. They were her charges. They were her sheep. It was her duty to herd them home. But Little Bopeep has lost her sheep!

"What was the idea?" the attendant asked.

"The idea," gasped Miss Pomeroy, "was to make me as mad as I am."

"Well, I don't blame—"

She put her fingers to her mouth and turned away, to walk back and forth. She must think what to do. Think.

Walk off the rage. At least put it aside. Let it be no factor in the problem, as, she thought bitterly, I am old enough to have learned I must do.

She continued walking. Cars pulled in behind her. The attendant sent her anxious glances. He had no solution. The red rage died bitterly to a cold gray discouragement. She knew she had lost these sheep, for an unknown reason, long ago. At last she came back to the only answer. Miss Pomeroy must behave correctly. Gritting her teeth, holding herself high, Miss Pomeroy resolved to do so. The course of action she must follow formed in her mind.

She walked back to the attendant. "You saw my car leave?"

"Yes, ma'am. That is, outa the back of my head—"

“You saw three girls, and only three girls, in it?”

He winced. “No, ma’am, honest. If I’d a noticed, I’d a certainly yelled after them.”

“I am not blaming you,” said Miss Pomeroy in a controlled voice. “I only ask whether you would take an oath that they were alone?”

“Well, I— No, I can’t, I guess. As I said—”

“That being so,” said Miss Pomeroy, “where can I find the police?”

“Oh-oh,” he said, and his eyes lighted with a sympathetic gleam.

But she shook her head. “I am responsible,” she said slowly, trying her thoughts aloud. “What if I were wrong? What if they are kidnaped or in some danger, and I sit here, *sure* that they’ve played me as dirty a trick as this. I would never be forgiven for that, would I?”

“No,” he said, frowning. “I guess not. But listen. I’m pretty sure nothing like that could—”

“I’m pretty sure, too,” said Miss Pomeroy wearily. “But—where’s the police station?”

“Gee, ma’am, if I was you—” He looked into her troubled eyes. “I guess you’re right, though,” he said respectfully. He pointed the way. Still frowning, he watched her go.

As he listened, the officer of highway patrol was frowning, too. “I feel sure,” said Miss Pomeroy, “that it’s only a prank. But you can see how I don’t dare let it go at that.”

He said sharply, “They stole your car.”

“Technically, I suppose they did.” Miss Pomeroy met his eyes. “That isn’t my point. I must try to make sure they are safe.”

“Three dizzy kids on the highway in a car they took without permission are not safe,” he proclaimed grimly. “We’ll pick them up for stealing your car.”

“I’ll press no such charge,” she warned.

“Why not?”

“Because I know perfectly well they do not mean to steal my car. They won’t keep it or sell it or deprive me of my property. And I can’t pretend to

think so.”

“Why some fool kids can break the law and get away with it *because* they’re fool kids, I do not know.”

“If you please—”

“What do you want us to do? Find ’em, look ’em over, say, ‘Okay, no kidnapers. Just a joy ride in a car that doesn’t belong to you, against the will of the owner. Bless you, go right ahead.’” She stared at him miserably. “One thing to see if they’re safe. Another to keep ’em that way. You better let me bring ’em in. But you’ve got to give me some basis to go on.”

“I—see.”

“Afterward, you can do as you see fit.”

She nodded, and he gathered his notes, descriptions, and details, and left the room to give his orders. Miss Pomeroy clasped her hands, which were trembling in reaction and foreboding.

The officer came back. Standing over her, he said kindly, “I can see that you’re trying mighty hard to do the right thing. That’s so, isn’t it?”

“That’s so,” she said gratefully.

“Uh-huh.” His brow was clear. “If you’d like to take a chair out there, why, we ought to bring them in before too long.”

MISS POMEROY’S car wound merrily through the pass. Jane leaned on the back of the front seat and giggled into the ears of her companions. “We can swear we saw her getting on the bus. How could she leave poor little us? Boo-hoo.”

“Dull,” said Norma. “Very dull.”

“Say a man grabbed Jane. We’re heroines. We chased the villain.”

“She won’t believe it,” said Norma calmly.

“Care to watch her try?” said Sheela.

Norma seemed to roll the idea on her tongue. “*You* could do it, Shee. Jane can’t act.”

“I can if you don’t make me laugh, you guys.”

Sheela turned the wheel, and the car reeled on the curve. “She’ll blow her top,” said Norma dreamily.

“I hope,” said Sheela. “I hope I lose.”

Then a police car was suddenly behind them, and its siren bleated, not wailingly, but in short, snarling command. Sheela straightened at the wheel. Norma turned to look. The police car, snarling, nosed at them. “Well, darn her eyes!” cried Norma. “Pomeroy’s called the cops!”

Jane squealed. Sheela’s feet seemed to shuffle and shove. Her freckles stood out on her whitening cheeks. There was a moment of confusion and dismay. The police car dropped back, growling. Sheela was busy, hands and feet. Suddenly the car began to sail faster, and the tires complained on the winding roadbed. “Shee!” Sheela’s mouth was a colorless line. Her thin, wiry arms were taut, her eyes frozen ahead.

The police car lost ground, couldn’t believe, had to believe, took umbrage, yowled, jumped after. The highway curved on down.

On the third wild turn, at their increasing speed, Jane was thrown and began to squeal alarm. She crawled down on the floor. Norma’s white lids rolled. “Take it easy,” she said grudgingly. “Listen, Shee!” There was no response in Sheela’s tense face and taut body. Norma said no more. She braced her fat knees on the dash and closed her eyes. There was no siren behind them. The car staggered to stay on its four wheels as they swooped down sickeningly. The road shook itself out of the folds of the land and, on a long, straight, shallow decline, ran finally into the plain. They were whizzing along the level when behind, catlike, patient, the siren pounced, snarling lightly.

As if Sheela’s nerve broke all at once, Miss Pomeroy’s car began to waver. It was forced toward the ditch as their pursuer approached on their left. Its right wheels struck soft dirt. The car shuddered. There was a quick little waltzing skid, a moment of perfect cessation, and then Miss Pomeroy’s car, with an air of surrender, rather quietly turned over.

EUNICE POMEROY wept and permitted her mother to pat and stroke and pet her, as mothers will. “It might have been worse,” soothed Mrs. Pomeroy, “They might have been killed. It’s a mean thing, a horrid thing, Eunie, dear. But they’ll recover, all of them. Even Sheela. And it’s not your fault. Come, drink your hot tea. You’ve certainly done all you can do tonight.”

“Not quite all, Mother.”

“But what more?”

Eunice pushed at her fair hair. "I've got to call the school."

"Now? But it's so late."

"Now. Mother, I've got to resign."

"I don't see—"

"You wouldn't. You're on my side." Miss Pomeroy patted her mother, and then stiffened her shoulders. "It's just that I'm responsible," she said.

Waiting for the connection, Miss Pomeroy could see everything clearly in her mind. She could see that all the intermediate details were going to drop out of the story. Little Bopeep had lost her sheep, and Little Bopeep wasn't supposed to. She was trusted not to lose them. And the sins of the sheep weren't going to matter. Waiting, quieted by the release of her tears, she could see the disaster.

It was all so clear to her that Miss Hunt's characteristic, indecisive reaction was something of a surprise.

"I quite understand," said Miss Hunt, "why you went to the police."

"Thank you, Miss Hunt. But for the school— Would you prefer to dismiss me?" Small and cold, her voice went out over the wire. "I'll understand."

"We'll wait a little," said Miss Hunt, firm in her policy of being tentative. "I'm glad it's no worse. Where are they?"

"In the hospital."

"And not critically hurt?"

"No, I believe not. Jane was only bruised. And shocked, of course. Norma broke a wrist. Sheela is the worst. Her jaw and both forearms." Miss Pomeroy forced steadiness into her report.

"A pity," said Miss Hunt. "They tried to run away from the police, you say? That, of course, is— Dear me!"

"I'm sorry. I realize—"

Miss Hunt's voice became stronger. "I would like to think it all over," she said, "before you resign."

"Very well, Miss Hunt. Thank you."

"It will straighten out somehow," said Miss Hunt vaguely. "Now, try not to be upset. We'll see."

Miss Hunt, reflected Eunice, got along in the world by being vague, by waiting out storms, by an expert fumbling, at the end of which process Miss Hunt usually emerged with nobody mad at her and at least a facsimile of what she'd wanted in the first place. Well, it was a policy. She sighed. For herself, there was still no course but to behave correctly. One had to cling to whatever policy one had.

Yet, here she was, Eunice Pomeroy, twenty-nine, who had been to the war, had seen both men and women dutifully die; who had loved, and lost a lover to death and duty; who had patched up her life again and gone back to teaching because she had a call to teach; who now saw the whole framework of her poor second-best future, in which she had hoped to heal her wounds, falling apart. She felt very old. She thought, Let it fall. One had to stick to whatever one tried to do or be.

THE next day she dressed neatly and soberly, as a teacher ought, borrowed her mother's car, and set out on one more round of duty. It would be painful, but it was correct.

The town in which the girls lived was only about twenty miles north of her own. Jane's house was a pleasant white colonial. Miss Pomeroy rang the bell.

"Oh, yes, Miss Pomeroy." Jane's mother looked frightened and tearful. Yes, indeed, they'd brought Jane home. Yes, she was all right. A terrible experience. Jane's mother babbled more of this.

Jane's father came from somewhere within the house. "It's that Sheela Mason," he said at once, looking angry. "I've told Janey before to quit running around with her. She's a wild one. I've always thought so. Too much money there, Miss Pomeroy. Spoiled rotten. Janey wouldn't have gotten into this mess, wouldn't have gone off the way they did. It was that Sheela's idea. And that Norma Bache isn't much better. They led Janey into it."

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Avery," said the teacher soberly.

"Janey says that when the cops came up she tried to get Sheela to stop, and Sheela wouldn't even listen. Of all the stupid stunts! I've got a mind to sue Malcolm Mason for what his kid did. You see that he pays the damage to your car. He ought to pay." In some way, money was the balm, and the loss of it was the punishment—or so Jane's father seemed to be saying.

“Just outrageous,” said Jane’s mother. “And if that Sheela Mason goes back to the school, I don’t think Jane will. I really don’t think so, Miss Pomeroy.”

“I’m sorry.” Miss Pomeroy was a little staggered.

“Listen,” said Jane’s father, his eyes restlessly searching the teacher’s face. “I don’t blame you for calling the cops. Not for one minute. It would have served that Sheela right, done her good, if she had been picked up and thrown in the calaboose for a while. For a stunt like that. If I’d been you I’d have been plenty mad and done the same thing.”

“I knew, of course, it was a prank. I hope you understand.”

“We understand, Miss Pomeroy. Of course we do. We don’t believe in letting a kid run absolutely wild. We don’t blame *you* in the least, you know.”

“May I see Jane?” said Miss Pomeroy feebly.

“Poor kid doesn’t feel so wonderful.” His eyes were wary.

“I only want to say I’m sorry.”

It was obvious that the Averys believed Miss Pomeroy had, of course, taken revenge, and that they expected her to stand with them, making Jane out a victim and Sheela (and behind her, in some dim way, her father’s money) the scapegoat for everything. This whole interpretation was so far from her own that Miss Pomeroy felt bewildered.

Jane was in bed, surrounded by comforts. Jane was scared. But if she was bewildered, she wouldn’t be for long. Her parents were showing her the way to creep out of trouble.

Miss Pomeroy felt sad. “How are you feeling?” she asked gently.

Jane said, “Not too bad.” Her face reddened. “I guess I was lucky.”

“I wouldn’t have had this happen. I was responsible for you. I wanted the police only to make sure you were safe.”

Whether Jane believed this, she couldn’t tell, for Jane said quickly, defensively, “Sheela wouldn’t stop. I wasn’t driving. I don’t drive.”

“I know, Jane.”

“It was dumb to run.”

“Yes.”

Jane lowered her glance. “Miss Pomeroy, I’m so sorry about the whole thing,” she quavered, preparing to weep. And her father looked proud. Oh, yes, tears got you pity, not trouble. It was a policy.

Miss Pomeroy said quietly, “You and Sheela won’t be friends any more?”

“Oh, no!”

Miss Pomeroy looked at the pretty, frightened face. “Do you know how badly Sheela is hurt?”

“No, I—not exactly. When we left the hospital—”

“Don’t you care?” said Miss Pomeroy.

“I didn’t think she ought—” said her father. “After all, the sooner she forgets the whole unfortunate—”

“Sheela was hurt the worst,” interrupted Miss Pomeroy gently. “However, although it will take a little while, she will be all right.” She waited quietly.

Jane’s hands closed on the bright comforter. On her babyish face something stern, something resolute, was trying to form. “Sheela was always so much fun,” she said in a low voice.

Miss Pomeroy smiled at her. “Of course she is,” she said, changing the tense. She heard herself echoing Miss Hunt. “It will all straighten out.” She touched Jane’s hand. “Just be brave,” she warned. And Jane, with a flash of understanding across her face, nodded.

The Averys thanked Miss Pomeroy for coming, but she left them as quickly as she could. She felt a little better—as if the little white woolly sheep that was Jane had somehow returned to the fold.

NORMA lived several blocks away, on an older street. The house was enormous. A servant opened the door. “Miss Norma is just fine,” said the servant mechanically. “Would you like to see Mrs. Bache?”

“Please.”

“Frankly,” said Norma’s mother, “I don’t believe the girls have ever liked you, Miss Pomeroy. They had some sort of wager, I believe. It hardly seemed a good relationship.” She was a heavy woman, heavily made up, and her brows, like Norma’s, were the messengers of her meaning.

“It wasn’t,” confessed Miss Pomeroy. “I know.”

“To set the police after them as thieves,” said Mrs. Bache, “was technically just but, as a teacher, hardly mature of you.”

“I did not intend to set the police after them as thieves,” said Miss Pomeroy. “I wanted only to protect them.”

“Really?”

Mr. Bache entered the room. “No great harm done,” said he.

“I agree,” said his wife. “Luckily. Of course, Sheela was a fool to run away.”

Miss Pomeroy bit her lip. “I came to say I’m sorry. Is Norma in much pain?”

“Doesn’t amount to much,” her father said. He was heavy, too, and he had a shrewd eye. “*I think the least said the better.*”

“**I**F,” said Miss Pomeroy carefully, “some criminal person had got into my car and driven off with the girls, and if I had assumed it was just a prank they were playing and sat in that gas station, waiting—and if *then* they had come to harm—”

Mrs. Bache looked frostily down her nose. “Nonsense,” she said.

“What would you have said to me *then*?” Miss Pomeroy said.

“No use worrying about might have been,” said Norma’s father. “Might have been killed, so far as that goes. But they weren’t. Be as good as new, all of them. Things happen.” He dismissed it.

“Is Norma here?”

“I don’t know that she cares to see you,” said her mother.

“Will you inquire?” asked Miss Pomeroy quietly.

But she was bewildered. On the father’s face she found no clue. “Do you expect Norma to be friendly with Sheela now?” she asked, in pure curiosity.

“The families are friendly,” he answered coldly. “Sheela must have learned that you don’t run away from the cops. Norma had more sense. In fact, she tried to stop her, but the girl was stubborn about it. Was used to having her own way, eh?” His face was hard. One’s own way was always wrong, he implied. No one should have it. He did not.

“I’m sorry your wife feels as she does. But I—”

“Don’t pay any attention.”

“But I’m afraid she’s quite right,” said Miss Pomeroy forlornly.

“Doesn’t pay to blame yourself in this world,” he said crisply. “You don’t get ahead that way.”

“Will you come with me, Miss Pomeroy?” said the mother.

Norma was on a sun porch at the back of the house. Her wrist was bound. Otherwise, she looked much as usual. She was not scared. In her heavy face, the eyes were cold. Miss Pomeroy sat down and put her hand to her own eyes.

She heard Mrs. Bache say, “If Miss Pomeroy tires you, Norma, ring.” She heard Mrs. Bache withdraw. Here was no fluttering over the baby bird.

Norma said calmly, “Have you seen Shee?”

“Not yet.”

“They wouldn’t let me in her room.”

“I called an hour ago, and she’s all right,” Miss Pomeroy told her. She lowered her hand. Norma’s face showed no particular emotion. Miss Pomeroy felt the need of a desperate directness. “Tell me what the wager was,” she cried.

Norma’s face didn’t change. “Why, Shee had a notion you wouldn’t do anything to us, no matter what we did.”

“What!”

Norma shrugged. “I thought she was wrong. I said you had a boiling point.” Her lips drew back from her teeth. “And I was right,” the smile said.

“No,” murmured Miss Pomeroy. “On the whole, Sheela was right. But I can’t understand—”

Norma raised her brows, to remind Miss Pomeroy of the police chase.

Miss Pomeroy shook her head. “I wouldn’t have charged you with stealing the car,” she said impatiently. “I can prove that. It’s on record. It doesn’t worry me.”

“Something worries you?” said Norma, maliciously soft.

“Why you dislike me worries me very much.”

“I don’t,” said Norma, shrugging. “But I guess Shee does.”

“On your part, it’s general malice?” said Miss Pomeroy boldly.

Under the heavy lids, Norma’s eyes were just a little hurt. “Why not skip it?”

“Your father’s advice.”

“The boiling point is missing around here,” said Norma carelessly.

“Sheela’s a—charmer.” Miss Pomeroy leaned forward. “I can recognize that. I see that you go along with her or else you lose her. And she’s—valuable.” Norma blinked. “If you go along, Norma, just to try to please Sheela, I’ll—buy that. Otherwise—”

“I try to please almost nobody,” said Norma sullenly.

“Let’s leave Sheela out of it then. I am concerned about you.”

“Almost nobody is concerned about me,” said Norma in the same tone.

Miss Pomeroy stared. She said, “Your mother?”

“My mother is clever. She doesn’t kid herself much. She sees through.”

“Yes, I agree.” Miss Pomeroy reflected that Mrs. Bache, and only she, so far, had seen through to how this trouble began.

“She knows I’m a fat slob,” said Norma.

“I don’t quite—”

“You can call it general malice.” Norma shrugged uneasily. “A jolly fat girl,” she murmured, “usually gets it in the neck.”

“Whereas,” said Miss Pomeroy at once, “the fat and evil character is at least respected.”

Norma looked surprised and laughed. “I’ve got no charm,” she said.

BUT inside the girl there was somebody else, and Miss Pomeroy saw the flesh shred and leave the insider bare. “Oh, yes, you do,” she said. “You have a hex on Sheela. You can’t be shocked.” Miss Pomeroy laughed. “That’s your trick, isn’t it? Nothing’s too wicked for you, Norma. Sometimes it’s too stupid, too uninteresting—”

The flesh sat still, but the insider was squirming. “Boring,” said Norma uneasily.

Miss Pomeroy smiled. Now she knew that inside the fat girl there was a cold, very thin little viper, which, like Norma's mother, could see through and, like Norma's father, took the brunt, skipped it, calculated how to get ahead. And was yet a poor, thin little snake. Now Miss Pomeroy had a hex on Norma.

"You don't even blame Sheela," she stated. "Nor will you abandon her."

"No." Norma looked more flustered than her teacher had ever seen her. "I don't blame her. We had a bet. About the cops. I guess she was so furious she *couldn't* think. I tried to say something, but she was kinda gone. I don't drive, but I had sense enough not to yell and holler at her. It was bad enough. She must have felt wild, but I—don't blame anyone." Norma looked defiant.

Miss Pomeroy leaned back. "I find myself with a good deal of respect for that," she said. "Now, tell me why Sheela's so against me. I won't *believe* that you don't know."

Norma said nothing.

"Of course, if you enjoy this feud too much to give me a chance—" Miss Pomeroy bit her tongue. "Don't you think it's getting a little boring?"

Norma flushed. "It was that study-hall business," she said. "All the time you preach doing the right thing, but that day you didn't stick to it. So when you preach sticking to things, which you do, Sheela thinks you're a fake. She wouldn't mind, I guess," said Norma, "only she wishes you weren't."

It was Miss Pomeroy's turn to flush. "But," she said mechanically, "the rule was Miss Hunt's rule. Miss Hunt is my superior. She told me to compromise."

"*Sheela* never knew that," Norma said.

"No, of course. She couldn't," said Miss Pomeroy wonderingly. "It looked like my own decision. It was meant to. I was in the Army," she added suddenly.

"Oh." Then they grinned at each other.

Miss Pomeroy sprang up. "Be good," she said lightly, and then, twinkling, "or at least as good as you dare."

"I'll try not to be dumb," said Norma, with a flash of spirit.

"That ought to serve," said Miss Pomeroy. "Your brain's no slob, my lass, nor is your understanding." She saw the flesh quiver, the cold eyes

confess the loneliness inside.

Miss Pomeroy sailed out of the house, past Mrs. Bache's three uplifted chins, with a bare murmur of politeness. She felt much better. She knew for a fact that two of her sheep were found. Moreover, the black fleece on one of them was only a dye—protective coloration. There was left, of course, that one ewe lamb.

MISS POMEROY drove to the Mason estate and then to the hospital, for Sheela's parents were there with her.

Mrs. Mason was slight and elegant, dressed in beautiful clothes. She seemed quite numb with anxiety. Miss Pomeroy's words hardly penetrated her well-mannered shell. "We're very sorry, of course," she kept saying. For what, she did not say, and whether she understood Miss Pomeroy's remarks, Miss Pomeroy could not be sure.

When Malcolm Mason—summoned—arrived, Miss Pomeroy knew that here came the disaster. He shouldered his wife aside. "I'll take care of this, Selma. I've met this woman. Miss Pomeroy," he boomed, "first let me say that the damage to your car will be paid for. Is that clear?"

"Mr. Mason, I have hardly thought—"

"Let me also say that your action in setting a police car to chase those children through the mountains is criminal."

"I did not—"

"They might have been killed," he thundered. "I would like to sue you and the police for every cent I could get. Surely you knew it was a joke!"

"I knew it was supposed to be a joke," said Miss Pomeroy, desperately hanging onto her temper, "of course." She swung toward the mother, on whose face there was only the same anxious, remote look as before. "If you will ask the officer—"

"Oh, you tried to duck it. You thought you were smart. But you won't be smart enough to teach school ever again."

"That may be."

"I'll insist upon your immediate dismissal from your present post and I'll see that you never get another."

"You're not fair!" cried Miss Pomeroy.

“Oh, no? You were perfectly furious at my daughter. Admit that?”

“I admit that,” said Miss Pomeroy, “but I did not *act* furiously.”

“**B**OLONNEY,” said Mr. Mason. “This pious tale that you thought they were kidnaped. You were not only furious, but sly. You tried to take it out on them and protect yourself, too. But you won’t—”

“You think I should have assumed, beyond question, that your daughter was maliciously trying to anger me?”

“You thought she was,” he roared, “didn’t you? Isn’t it your business to get along with your students? If they want to play a practical joke on you, isn’t it in a large measure your fault?”

“Yes, I—”

“You admit it. All right. Now, you think your position is unassailable. If I can get at you legally, I will. If not, there are other ways. I maintain you acted out of all proportion.”

“Mr. Mason, do you maintain that Sheela was *right* to try to outspeed a police car?”

“I maintain she was terrified, I maintain that a young girl—rather, an inexperienced driver—can’t cope with a police siren on her heels. I maintain they had no business chasing her on a mountain road, and I further maintain that you instructed them to do so.”

“I gave the police officer the distinct understanding—”

“You gave him the cute little idea that my daughter deserved a good scare, and it nearly killed her.”

“I—”

“His *words*, Miss Pomeroy. And I’ll break him. I will also break you.”

“He will,” said Sheela’s mother, without any force.

“You will discover,” said Malcolm Mason, “that you can’t do this sort of thing to my daughter.”

“Can’t I?” said Miss Pomeroy. “Mr. Mason, you make no effort to understand my position, and I will make no more to understand yours. I have already resigned from the school and I won’t starve if I never teach again. I think,” she said quietly, “I will do to your daughter, not what I have been trying to do, which is understand and protect her, but what ought to be

done to anybody's daughter who breaks the law. I think I will now press the charge that she stole my car."

"Try," he said, as quietly as she.

"Oh, Miss Pomeroy," said Sheela's mother softly, "no. Don't try."

Miss Pomeroy was trembling. "You don't even know the basis for what happened, and you will never know. You'll go on screaming for special privileges for *your daughter*. You will go blindly on, smashing those who try to teach her. But you won't give her what she needs and lacks and wants so much."

"A lot you know."

"What she wants and *you deny*—fair discipline from some person of integrity."

"Try to tell me *you've* got integrity."

"I have a boiling point, like everyone else," cried Miss Pomeroy, "and I just boiled over. But I can simmer down. Yes, I have some integrity. At least I know what it is, and I strive for it. I withdraw my threat. I will not charge Sheela with theft. She isn't the thief. *You* are. You are robbing a potentially fine human being of a necessity of life."

Mrs. Mason turned her lovely head.

"Now, if you please, I wish to speak to Sheela," said Miss Pomeroy, as firmly as she was able.

"I won't allow it," he snapped.

"Very well. Now you are robbing me."

"I won't have you shouting at her that she's a thief. She's hurt and she's suffering, and by the Lord, Miss Pomeroy, you better leave before I—"

"There is a misunderstanding between Sheela and me," said Miss Pomeroy. "I have a right to try to clear it up."

He glared at her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's because it's in Sheela's life, not yours," snapped Miss Pomeroy. "It's about time you stopped thinking of Sheela as an extension of your own ego. She is alive in her own right, and God help you, Mr. Mason, the day you are forced to find it out."

The frozen woman in the beautiful beige suit came alive. “You may go in to Sheela, Miss Pomeroy,” she said. “Yes, Malcolm.” She drew herself up. “I am Sheela’s mother. I am alive in my own right, too,” she added with ominous quiet. “It has just occurred to me.”

“Selma—”

“Everybody tells me she is fine,” Selma said. “You. The doctors. You are all wrong. Something is bothering Sheela. I know. Maybe Miss Pomeroy can clear it up. I insist, Malcolm.” Her voice rose.

“All right. Sh.” He turned, a man badgered by the hysteria of women.

“I’ll do her no harm,” said Miss Pomeroy.

“Go in, then,” he barked. “We’ll be right beside you, so mind what you say. You can have two minutes.”

“That will do,” said Eunice Pomeroy.

SHEELA was dumb. Only her eyes moved in her pale face. She could not speak because of her broken jaw. Both arms were in casts. She looked pitiable. Miss Pomeroy, her heart wrenched, came closer to the high bed.

“Can you say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ with your eyes, child?”

The eyes were suddenly brilliant. They said, “Yes.”

“Jane is not hurt at all. Norma has only a broken wrist. They’re both home.”

The eyes were grateful.

“Jane is forbidden to see you any more. But she wants to. She may find the nerve to try.”

The eyes understood.

“Norma blames you for nothing, will always be your friend.”

The eyes turned. Good old Norma. Good old fat, unshockable, unshakable Norma. Miss Pomeroy could have wept.

“What’s all this?” Mason said hoarsely.

“News of her own world that she needs to know,” said Miss Pomeroy tartly. “Another thing, Sheela. Last fall, Miss Hunt ordered me to let you go. Norma says you didn’t realize.”

Sheela's lashes trembled.

"It was my duty," said Miss Pomeroy, "although I did not like it. Now, there's not much more. You knew beforehand that I wouldn't 'do anything to you.'" She kept looking into the strangely attractive eyes, which changed like weather. "And I won't. You don't know the reason. It isn't because I am afraid"—Sheela's eyes went to her father, just a flash—"of money," said Miss Pomeroy, feeling again the urge to weep. "But because I knew we weren't friends. That made me uncertain, you see. I didn't realize how it was that you came to be so—disappointed in me."

She wanted to weep, but she smiled instead. "Perhaps we will never meet again," she said. "It would be rather silly and huffy of me to call you a thief. I don't. I know you wanted to annoy me. And by the way, that you did." She smiled and then straightened and looked sharply into the eyes. "I don't call you a fool, either," she said rather loudly. "I know how intelligent you are. I find myself unable to *believe* that you ran away from the police. That's the act of an angry, resentful little fool who can't see two feet beyond her nose. Why, Sheela, you *wanted* to make me mad. If you could, you'd have gone quietly with them and we'd have got into a frightful wrangle and come out friends or foes forever. *Sheela!*"

The eyes were lighted gloriously.

Miss Pomeroy turned around to the father. "Did you trouble to have my car examined?" she barked at him. "Was there something wrong with it? The brakes! *Sheela!*"

The eyes said, "Yes! Yes!"

Miss Pomeroy staggered. "This girl steered them safe out of that mountain road," she cried and wheeled on Malcolm Mason. "And *you*—" She stood still and swallowed four angry words: *you big blind fool!* But they rang in the room. "If any of us," she said, "remembered to treat her as if she were real— *You* needn't have blustered and roared to cover up what wasn't there. And *I* should have known. Sheela, forgive me."

Sheela's eyes were full of tears, for she was very young and she hadn't been respected. But they also said, with perfect trust, "Teach me, Miss Pomeroy."

Her father, looking startled, swore an oath and left them. Sheela's mother, looking beautiful, cried, "Darling, I knew there was something! Oh, thank you, thank you, Miss Pomeroy."

"It will be all right," said Eunice. "It will all straighten out somehow."

My sheep, she thought, are all home.

NEXT term, Miss Pomeroy faced her class in History C, marking the new flock—whites, grays, and possible blacks. In the front row sat Jane Avery, with her hair done as Miss Pomeroy wore hers. And Norma Bache, with a wide leather strap, masculine, dramatic, rather sinisterly worn where her plump wrist had long since healed. Between them, Sheela Mason, with her tea-colored eyes wide open to receive.

Miss Pomeroy already could feel currents in the classroom, drawing a pattern of new girls and old around this one girl, like iron filings to the magnetic source. The magnet who would lead, whom she could teach.

“Some of us,” began Miss Pomeroy happily, “have been through the wars together—”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Plot Against Miss Pomeroy* by Charlotte Armstrong]